Senate Statistics

Sergeants at Arms

Richard J. Bright
(1879-1883 and 1893-1900)

U.S. Senate Historical Office

In March 1879, a dead man guided the Senate's choice of a new sergeant at arms. Although Indiana's Senator Jesse Bright had been dead for nearly four years, Senate Democrats had him very much in mind when they filled that post with his nephew and namesake—Richard Jesse Bright. Seventeen years earlier, during the early months of the Civil War, the Republican-controlled Senate had expelled Jesse Bright—then the Senate's most senior Democrat—for "disloyalty to the Union." Now the Democrats, back in control of the Senate for the first time since before that war, had placed his nephew in this important office—as some believed—to get even.

A *New York Tribune* article, bearing the headline "The Confederacy in Power," reflected Republican outrage at this and related decisions. Although the South had lost the war, the *Tribune* pointed out, its loyal sons were now resuming key Senate posts as if that ruinous conflict had never taken place. In addition to the sergeant at arms, the southern-dominated Democratic caucus filled the offices of secretary, chief clerk, executive clerk, and chaplain with southern or border-state Democrats. Irate Yankees noted that the new secretary of the Senate had served on the staffs of three Confederate generals, that the chaplain's brother-in-law was a former Confederate secretary of war, and that the executive clerk had been a military aide to Robert E. Lee.

Republicans protested that not only were these bad choices, but they were also unnecessary, because no vacancies existed. They cited a Senate resolution, adopted thirty years earlier, that had ended the practice of voting on these officers at the beginning of every new Congress, thereby allowing them to serve during good behavior. As far as the Senate Republicans of 1879 were concerned, the officers they had elected several years earlier had behaved themselves and should not be dismissed.
"Not so!" responded the Democrats. Was not one of their Senate officers simultaneously serving as chairman of the Republican National Committee? How could this professional partisan fairly meet the needs of Democratic senators?

In desperation, Republicans dug up a twenty-five-year-old statement by a Democratic senator about the "exceeding importance of having a competent body of officers in the Senate, men who are trained and educated in the Senate, who know where to find what you want, how to give you information when you want it, and where to direct you to it." In 1854, the Senate had increased the salaries of its officers and legislative staff specifically to ensure that these important employees would remain. In 1879, the Republicans argued that to abruptly dismiss loyal employees in favor of untrained replacements could only harm the Senate and interrupt its proceedings. That party's senators worried—with good reason as it turned out—that their employees, including doorkeepers who had previously served in Union armies, might be forced to step aside in favor of ex-Confederate soldiers.

The appointment of Jesse Bright's nephew particularly galled the Republicans. Senator Bright had owned twenty slaves on a Kentucky farm and had opposed the use of force against the South, arguing that the seceding states would soon voluntarily return to the Union. Then came the July 1861 Battle of Bull Run. When Union forces captured an arms merchant trying to cross into Confederate territory, they found that he carried a letter of introduction from Senator Bright to Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Bright later told Senate investigators that he did this simply as a courtesy, for he considered both men to be his friends. He also emphasized that he had written the letter several weeks before the outbreak of hostilities. Not impressed with these arguments, the Senate's Republican majority quickly expelled Bright.

Richard Jesse Bright was born on March 14, 1833, in Madison, Indiana. He grew up in that Ohio River town, left to attend Brown University, and returned to establish a law practice. He built a thriving practice and started a political career with his election as Madison's city attorney. In 1868, he moved north to the more exciting political and social environment of the Indiana state capital. There he purchased the *Indianapolis Sentinel*, then described as a "stalwart Democratic paper." In Indianapolis, Bright developed a close personal and professional association with former state attorney general Joseph McDonald.

In 1871, Bright obtained a contract to do the state's official printing at the facilities of his newspaper company. Within months, however, a local grand jury indicted him on three counts of perjury in connection with his billings for paper supplies. With the help of his friend and attorney Joseph McDonald, Bright eventually had these charges dismissed. Soon after Bright's trial, McDonald won an Indiana seat in the United States Senate. When his party moved into the majority in 1879, he suggested Bright's selection as Senate sergeant at arms. As Republican newspapers began to alert their readers to Bright's former legal troubles, McDonald assured fellow Democrats that the indictments stemmed from the efforts of local Republicans to capture the lucrative state printing contract for a member of their party.

Within days of Bright's election, Senate Democrats introduced a resolution returning to the sergeant at arms exclusive authority to appoint and remove members of his staff. For

the past twenty-five years, the Senate had given the vice president power to override all such personnel actions. But in 1879, for the first time since 1854, the vice president was not a member of the party that controlled the Senate majority. This change further irritated Republican leaders.

One of those leaders, Rhode Island's Henry Anthony, charged that the Democratic caucus was now unfairly dictating the Senate's agenda and that the introduction of this resolution served as a good example of the Democratic "Juggernaut which rolls through the Senate, crushing out our venerable precedents, trampling upon our ancient usages, and breaking in upon the freedom of our discussions."

Democratic Senator George Pendleton responded that, as long as Senate officers were responsible to members, they should have authority to hire and fire staff without having to answer to an official "who, however high he may be in the Government, is not a Senator upon this floor and is not charged with the duties of a Senator." In adopting the resolution, the Senate gave Bright a degree of authority over staff selection greater than that of any previous sergeant at arms.

Richard Bright proved to be an effective and respected sergeant at arms. Members of both parties demonstrated that respect two years later, in March 1881, by agreeing to keep him in office when the Senate, for the first time, found itself equally divided between the two parties. At the start of the following Congress, in December 1883, however, the Republicans returned to the majority and dismissed Bright in favor of their own appointee. On that occasion, it became the Democrats' turn to raise arguments about the importance of continuity among the Senate's key officials.

In what proved to be a temporary retirement from the Senate, Bright opened a Washington law practice with Joseph McDonald and remained active in Democratic party affairs. He had so enjoyed the title of sergeant at arms that he took that post at three successive Democratic National Conventions, from 1884 to 1892. That service helped him maintain a network of friendships with party officials throughout the nation. When the Democrats regained control of the Senate following the 1892 election, they invited Bright to return as Senate sergeant at arms. On August 8, 1893, he became the first of only two persons to hold that office for two non-consecutive terms. (Joseph Duke became the second in 1955.)

When the Republicans regained the Senate majority in 1895, they agreed to keep Bright in office. This decision owed much to his effectiveness, but even more to the political realities of a deeply divided Republican caucus' inability to agree on a slate of officers. The Republicans also retained the Democratic secretary of the Senate and the Senate chaplain.

On February 1, 1900, with the Republican caucus more firmly under the control of its leaders, the sixty-six-year-old Bright decided the time had come to retire. In a Senate career that had spanned more than twenty years, Bright had become an authority on the Senate's rules, procedures, and customs. With careful confidence, he capably managed

presidential inaugurations and senatorial funerals. Newspaper reporters particularly valued his encyclopedic knowledge of Senate operations. As one observed, "Few men seek and find so many opportunities as he has daily discovered, in his career as Sergeant at Arms, to be the friend of the newspaper correspondent." Richard Bright remained in Washington for another twenty years, until his death on October 6, 1920